

Icon by the Hand of Photius Kontoglou.

### **The Holy Hieromartyr Dionysius the Areopagite Whom the Holy Church Celebrates on October 3.**

This Saint was from Athens, a learned man, and a member of the famous judicial court of Mars' Hill (in Greek *Areos Pagos*, hence the name Areopagite—see Acts 17:19-34). When Saint Paul preached in Athens, he was one of the first there to believe in Christ, and, according to some, became the first bishop of that city. Others say—and this may be more probable—that he was the second bishop of Athens, after Saint Hierotheus, whom Dionysius calls his friend and teacher “after Paul” (*On the Divine Names*, 3:2). With Saint Hierotheus he was also present at the Dormition of the most holy Theotokos; the Doxasticon of the Aposticha for the service of the Dormition is partly taken from a Passage in Chapter III of *On the Divine Names*.

Saint Dionysius' teaching is followed by all the Fathers of the Church. This teaching is primarily given in three of his books; *On the Divine Names*, *On the Heavenly Hierarchy*, and *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. There are also a number of passages in his Eleven Letters that are determinative.

Contrary to the then, and still current, approach in philosophy, our Saint maintains that;

“...the superessential Illimitability is placed above things essential and the Unity above conception is inconceivable to all conceptions; and the Good above word is unutterable by word...being after the manner of no existing being, and Cause of being to all, but Itself not being, as beyond every essence, and as It may manifest Itself with the authority which is appropriate to It” DN 1.1.

Our mind, on its own, cannot approach God without deception;

“And, if anyone, having seen God, understood what he saw, he did not see *It*, but some of Its creatures that are existing and known. But It Itself, highly established above mind, and above essence, by the very fact of Its being wholly unknown, and not being, both is superessentially, and is known above mind” (*Letter 1*).

Saint Dionysius continues,

“And you will find many of the Theologians<sup>1</sup> who have celebrated It, not only as invisible and incomprehensible, but also as inscrutable and untraceable, since there is no trace of those who have penetrated to Its hidden<sup>2</sup> infinitude” (DN 1.2).

Further, our Saint comments,

“The Theologians...celebrate It both without name and from every name. Without name, as when it is said that the Godhead Itself<sup>3</sup>, in one of those mystical apparitions of the symbolical Divine manifestation, rebuked him (Manoë; Jug. 13:2f.) who said, “What is Thy name?” and as leading him away from all knowledge of the Divine Name, said this, “and why dost thou ask my name?” and this (name) “is wonderful (θαυμαστόν)” (Jug. 13:18).

And is not this the wonderful name—the Nameless—“that fixed above every name which is named, whether in this age or in that which is to come?” (Eph. 1:21). Also, as “many named” as when they again introduce It as saying, “I am He That is (Ex. 3:15)—the Life—the Light—God—the Truth” (DN 1.6).

Saint Dionysius also touches upon his source of knowledge, that is, tradition:

“And whatever other divinely-wrought illuminations, conformable to the Oracles, the secret tradition (κρυφία παράδοσις) of our inspired leaders bequeathed to us for our enlightenment, in these also we have been initiated; *now* indeed according to our capacity, through the sacred veils of the loving-kindness towards man, made known in the Oracles and hierarchical traditions (ἱεραρχικῶν παραδόσεων)...but *then*, when we have become incorruptible and immortal, and have reached the Christlike and most blessed repose, according to

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<sup>1</sup> “The Theologians” is a term Saint Dionysius uses to refer to all the authors of the Canonical Scriptures.

<sup>2</sup> Holy Scripture speaks of the Hidden God: Jn. 1:18, 1 Jn. 4:12, 1 Tim. 6:16 and Ex. 33:20 LXX.

<sup>3</sup> The Fathers teach that every manifestation of God in the Old Testament is a manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ prior to His taking flesh from the womb of His mother, the Most Holy Theotokos.

the Divine saying, we shall be ‘ever with the Lord’ (Eph. 4:17), fulfilled, through all-pure contemplations, with the visible manifestation of God covering us with glory, in most brilliant splendours, as the disciples in the most Divine Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-8; Mk. 9:2-10; Lk. 9:28-36).... For, if all kinds of knowledge are of things existing, and are limited to things existing, that beyond all essence is also elevated above all knowledge” (DN 1.4).

Saint Dionysius begins his treatise, *On the Divine Names*, with a caution:

“By no means then is it permitted to speak, or even to think, anything, concerning the superessential and hidden Deity, beyond those things divinely revealed to us in the sacred Oracles” (DN 1.1).

Continuing with the emphasis on the centrality of the Oracles, i.e. the Scriptures, we hear him return to the Canon of Tradition as interpreting Scripture,

“by affirming that theology (i.e. Tradition) transmits some things as common, but others as distinctive; and neither is it meet to divide the common, nor to confuse the distinctive; but that following it according to our ability, we ought to rise to the Divine splendors; for, by taking thence the Divine revelations as a most excellent canon of truth, we strive to guard the things lying there in their native simplicity and integrity and unity—being ourselves guarded in our guard of the Oracles, and from these receiving strength to guard those who guard them” (DN 2.2).

“The (Names) then, common to the whole Deity, as we have demonstrated from the Oracles,...are the Super-Good, the Super-essential, the Super-Living, the Super-Wise, and whatever else belongs to the superlative abstraction; with which also all those denoting Cause, the Good, the Beautiful, Being, the Life-producing, the Wise, and whatever Names are given to the Cause of all Good, from Its goodly gifts.

“But the distinctive Names are the superessential name and property of Father and Son any Spirit, since no interchange or community in these is in any way introduced.

“But there is a further distinction, namely, the complete and unaltered existence of Jesus amongst us, and all the mysteries of love towards man actually existing within it” (DN 2.3).

We have here before us, beloved, those who have made the commendable effort to try and keep up with the strange language introduced by Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, a remarkable and remarkably important distinction set forward by our Saint. Holy tradition has put it into his hands; he simply speaks of “what things... (he) has seen and heard” (Lk. 7:22) as delivered to him by holy tradition. This is the distinction *in God* between the uncreated, unknowable, ineffable, unparticipatable Divine essence, and the uncreated Divine energies which we can know, talk about, participate in, experience, and enjoy both in this life and, for the Righteous, in the life of the age to come.

This is, first, a distinction that in no way depends upon our human ability or inability to know or experience God. God Himself reveals this to Moses:

And God said, Thou shalt not be able to see My face; for no man shall see My face and live (Ex. 33:20 LXX).

Of the Divine essence we are told by Saint Dionysius,

"That the Father is fontal Deity, but the Lord Jesus and the Spirit are, if one may so speak, God-planted shoots, and as it were Flowers and superessential Lights of the God-bearing Deity, we have received from the holy Oracles; but how these things are, it is neither possible to say, nor to conceive" (DN 2.7).

Simply put, we cannot know God in His Uncreated Essence, but we can know Him, participate in Him, experience Him, respond to Him, and love Him in His Uncreated Divine Energies. Saint Dionysius calls "the goodly progressions of the Godhead" a "Divine Distinction" (DN 2:11). This distinction in no way impairs the unity of God; again, when we hear Saint Dionysius speak of the distinction between the Uncreated Divine Hiddenness, or Essence, and the Uncreated Divine Progressions, or Energies, ever flowing into and supporting the creation, and the energies empowering our redemption, sanctification and deification in the Church, we are not speaking, God forbid, of two Gods or of a division in God. The Church believes in, lives in, knows and confesses the One true God. Amen.

This crucial distinction between the uncreated Divine essence (The Hidden God in St. Dionysius' way of speaking) and the uncreated Divine energies (the Divine Progressions, for St. Dionysius) is one of the most important gifts of the Orthodox Church to mankind. In the divine Liturgy when the Priest prays to Christ that the bread and wine be made the Body and Blood of Christ, "Changing them by Thy Holy Spirit," it is Christ, directly acting in His uncreated Divine energies, Who makes this change. The Priest is, through the prayer in the Liturgy, simply the instrument. The miracle of the Liturgy is God's work, not man's.

Ancient tradition informs us that he received a martyr's end (according to some, in Athens itself) about the year 96.

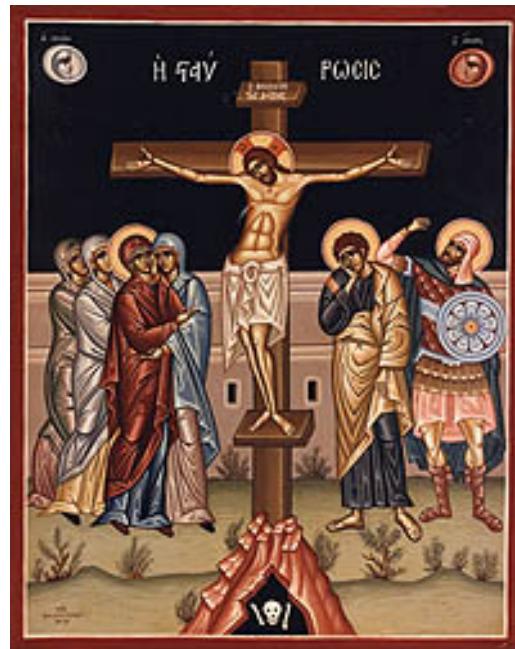
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*Dismissal Hymn. Fourth Tone*

**S**INCE thou hadst been instructed in uprightness thoroughly and wast vigilant in all things, thou wast clothed with a good conscience as befitteth one holy. Thou didst draw from the Chosen Vessel ineffable mysteries; and having kept the faith, thou didst finish a like course, O Hieromartyr Dionysius. Intercede with Christ God that our souls be saved.

*Kontakion. Plagal of Fourth Tone  
To thee, the Champion Leader*

**I**N spirit, thou didst pass through Heaven's gates, instructed by \* the great Apostle who attained to the third Heaven's heights, \* and wast made rich in all knowledge of things beyond speech; \* and then thou, O Dionysius, didst illuminate \* them that slumbered in the darkness of their ignorance. \* Hence, we all cry out: \* Rejoice, O universal Father.



In St. Dionysius's Eleventh Letter he mentions to Apollophanes that when they were both twenty-five years old they were together in Heliopolis in Lebanon and saw that the sun at about the sixth hour was darkened by the moon when the moon approached from the east, and not, as was usually the case, from the west, and then the moon went back across the sun again, "although that was a time which called neither for the presence of the moon, nor for the conjunction of the sun" by astronomical tables. St. Dionysius continues, "At last, when I had taken note of the day and year, and had perceived that, that time, by its testifying signs, agreed with that which Paul announced to me, when once I was hanging upon his lips, then I gave my hand to the truth, and extricated my feet from the meshes of error" (cf. Acts 17:22-34).